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Author(s): Debbie Wagener

Title: Promoting independent learning skills using video on digital language
laboratories

Date: 2006

Originally published in: Computer Assisted Language Learning

Example citation: Wagener, D. (2006). Promoting independent learning skills using
video on digital language laboratories. *Computer Assisted Language Learning*,
19(4/5), 279-286

Version of item: Author's post-print

Available at: <http://hdl.handle.net/10034/30581>

Promoting independent learning skills using video on digital language laboratories

Abstract

This paper relates to a small pilot research project at the University of Chester to investigate the impact of a range of distance-learning materials based on on-line video on student learning. The project focussed on the development of language skills as well as independent learning skills using a learning resource of short on-line news reports with supporting materials and examined student progress and perceptions via an end of module questionnaire. The outcome of the research suggests that regular independent listening practice via short video clips is beneficial to developing listening skills and that these benefits are also generally perceived amongst the students themselves.

Introduction

This paper relates to a small pilot research project at the University of Chester to investigate the impact of a range of distance-learning materials based on on-line video on student learning. As well as focussing on developing specific language skills such as listening and consecutive translation, a central aim within this project was to facilitate greater independent student activity in two new digital language laboratories as the initial set-up period had been primarily devoted to establishing a range of materials for taught language sessions. In particular, increasing student diversity and a widening range of ability across language skills has tended to mean that greater emphasis needs to be placed on the development of independent learning skills targeted at personal learning needs. (Boud, 1988, p21) Furthermore, independent

learning is seen, in itself, to offer a general enhancement of the learning experience where the development of student responsibility for their own learning is seen as an essential part of the process.

‘If learners do not also develop the capability of directing their own learning ...they will be only partially educated’ (Boud in Hammond and Collins, 1991,)

In order to develop relatively innovative distance-learning materials appropriate to the digital environment, the project focussed on the use of digital video clips as a language learning tool. Even prior to the digital age there have been many reasons for using video footage in language learning. Not only does it provide a sample of authentic language on a wide range of subjects ‘in a variety of situations, voices accents, themes and presentation techniques’ (Hill, 1999) but the images can also provide valuable additional socio-cultural information about the country or countries whose language we are learning. Where the speaker(s) can also be seen their lip movements, facial expressions and body language can also significantly facilitate understanding of the language used and help the learner to recognise important paralinguistic signals. The moving image is also an ‘inherently attractive and compelling medium with great potential for motivating learners’ (Hill, 1999) and ‘not only supports language learning, but also motivates pupils and teachers, encouraging highly creative and imaginative work’. (Bailey and Dugard, 2006) Digitalisation then enhances the familiar medium as a learning tool by making it quick to manipulate so that small sections can be revisited and scrutinised with ease. Otto Peters (2000) also argues that

‘the digital learning environment enables *open* learning situations and learning based on active interactions. Instead of “passive” receptive learning we find the *independent* and *self-determined* and *self-regulated* acquisition of knowledge based on the student’s own strategies for searching, finding, selecting and applying’.

Since the advent of the world wide web there has also been a proliferation of short video clips on many websites. These are most commonly short news reports, film clips and advertisements and all provide a valuable resource as varied and authentic and current learning materials. Particularly current and relevant are the many news sites which often provide short clips of off-air footage in manageable chunks of 1-3 minutes although some longer reports are also generally available. Typically these reports are available for just a number of days before they are replaced with newer stories and some are replaced daily. The French and Spanish channels <http://www.france2.fr/> and <http://www.informativos.telecinco.es/>, for example, currently select a current topic of interest for a ‘video of the day’. The motivational factor is clear. This is information ‘hot off the press’ and highly relevant to the current cultural background of the language being studied. The very same characteristic also creates, however, a significant disadvantage. The clip may not be available long enough for the teacher to exploit it in any meaningful way, although many sites such as <http://www.heute.de/ZDFheute> also maintain very good archives so that videos on a ‘Mediathek’ can often be located on a specific subject via a key word search for a longer period. Where effective access is not possible there is also now software available which can capture on-line video streams in both Windows Media and Real Player formats, such as *WM Recorder* and *RM Recorder* respectively. Both these

programmes function by capturing the URL of the videostream which can then be used to record the stream as a digital file. Such software is both easily downloadable and very affordable. Also readily available is intuitive editing software such as *Windows Movie Maker* which enables the user to edit clips effectively, paste clips together etc with a range of transition modes. Also, most importantly the ‘titles and credits’ facilities enable the user to label each clip effectively as to its exact provenance as required by copyright law.

It must be acknowledged then at this stage that depending on the site there may be significant barriers to overcome in order to gain rights over many materials but current advice from the Association for University Language Centres indicates that there is some movement towards resolution in this matter. Currently the ERA, the Educational Recording Agency offers a licence for recording programmes off-air in the UK to which most educational institutions subscribe to and foreign programmes received by satellite into the UK are generally seen to be part of this agreement which comes under section 35 of the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.(as below)

What remains problematic is where items that are considered to be ‘on demand’ i.e. the viewer determines when to watch them. Such materials are generally seen to comprise a different category which is excluded from the ERA licence and section 35 of the CDPA. There is, however, a grey area here as to whether a short-lived on-line news broadcast is essentially an ‘on-demand’ item. In instances of doubt it is still possible, of course, to write directly to the provider and ask for permission to record a small number of clips per semester and also to offer a small fee as an incentive, whereby it must be stressed that materials captured in this way need to remain for ‘non-commercial educational use’ only. It should be noted that this includes not

making materials available to students at home i.e. via an internal network as this also breaks copyright regulations. In the same way video clips should not be sent by email either by the lecturer or indeed by the student sending in completed coursework, for example.

The advantage of capturing video-streams is not only that there is then time to edit them and exploit them more thoroughly but that they can also be loaded onto a digital language laboratory as digital files where the ease of manipulation for the student is increased tenfold. Analogue recordings from off-air programmes can also be digitised easily with software such as Windows Movie Maker once the hardware (video or dvd player) has been linked to the computer (see your technician !).

Once downloaded onto the digital laboratory, the video clip can be exploited using the same range of functions as other materials leading to a number of very useful language learning applications. Thus, for example, the facility to record on a second track, the volume of which may be switched up or down against the master, can be used by students to record their own version of the soundtrack. This can usefully be, for example, a rehearsal of their own summary of a news report using typical journalistic delivery or the summary could also be produced in English as a form of consecutive interpreting exercise. Students can also enjoy trying to mimic the original as closely as possible in order to focus on pronunciation and intonation. Alternatively the facility of being able to add written subtitles to a video clip provides students with the opportunity to test their writing skills as well, either via a direct transcript (dictation by another name !) or again as a summarised version or translation into English. Such clips can then also be edited by the students using editing software as

above, although such 'altered' versions of the original may not be kept for posterity as this is also restricted under copyright law. Another valuable function of a digital language laboratory is the facility to view video clips whilst being able to complete a worksheet electronically on the same screen. This facilitates a quick response time and a worksheet that can be edited easily, printed or transmitted and enables the student to further develop valuable computer skills.

As indicated earlier a central aim of the project was to promote independent learning activity amongst the students and the exploitation of a language laboratory, digital or otherwise, lends itself very naturally to greater learning autonomy, whereby students gain control and are able to govern the pace of the learning exercise.. This central aim complements the general learning ethos at the University of Chester which encourages students to track their own learning from Level 1, in the belief that 'the negotiation of appropriate learning objectives and strategies serves to focus learning and provide clear goals and directions'... whilst also 'acknowledging individual differences and enabling learning activities to be tailored to the specific needs and interests of each learner.' (Anderson, Boud and Sampson, 1996) Language students thus undertake a guided self-audit of their individual language skills during the induction period and draw up a personal profile of particular strengths and weaknesses in terms of language skills but also in terms of learning skills e.g. how easily they acquire new vocabulary or are able to hear and repeat pronunciation accurately etc. They are then able to use this information to complete a learning agreement where they establish a number of personal learning targets which are suitable to their needs, as well as ascertaining a range of suitable strategies to match these aims. (Laycock and Stephenson, 1993) Students also contract to spend a

number of hours on self-directed activities based on those aims and strategies established, e.g. watching a feature film in the language for a certain number of hours per week in order to target general listening skills.

It is within the general ethos of fostering independent learning, as well as part of developments to fully exploit our two new language laboratories, that two new exploratory studies relating to independent learning self-access programmes within the curriculum were undertaken, running for one semester module each. Both programmes operated on a system of making one short news report available to the students on the language laboratory network per week. The news reports selected were topical, relating to issues of interest to the students such as student fees, music piracy etc., and were relatively short (1-3 minutes long) to enable intensive listening.

The first programme was embedded into a German Year 2 curriculum on contemporary studies and was thus highly appropriate for learning outcomes relating to improving knowledge in contemporary Germany and current affairs as well as to improvements in listening skills and vocabulary development. Each video report was presented together with a worksheet based on a range of different comprehension exercises such as gap or keyword exercises, true/false or factual questions etc. which students completed at their own pace during the week and then submitted, most usually in electronic form. They were then allowed access to both a key to the exercises and a transcript in order to self-check their understanding of the report. They were also recommended to listen to the report at least once with the transcript to assist their understanding of the flow of the language.

The second programme was incorporated into a German Year 3 module specialising in translation and was linked to learning outcomes to improve skills in consecutive translation i.e. to encourage students to produce a less polished, more summarised but immediate translation. To promote this, students were presented with a short news report of topical interest per week onto which they were required to record a second track in English as a spontaneous exercise rather than after the deliberation of a written translation. Again, once their work had been submitted, they were allowed access to a transcript to enable them to check the general accuracy of their translation and again they were recommended to listen to the report at least once with the transcript. The lack of 'teacher' feedback completed the circle of independent learning whereby students were obliged to focus on the actual work undertaken and its accuracy rather than on a mark and the lecturer's opinion. The intention is that such reflection should lead the student to a greater awareness of their personal weaknesses and the type of mistakes they are making and how to avoid them. It is also intended that the element of self-correction should also lead to a deeper language learning process and thus to a greater potential for long-term retention of the language learned. Certainly emails and comments back from students following receipt of transcripts revealed that some of this at least was happening.

Having set their own personal targets at the beginning of the semester relating to listening skills, vocabulary development, independent learning skills etc. students developed a programme of work designed to meet those aims and target the designated skills. At the end of the module students completed a short qualitative feedback questionnaire which requested subjective information on five main areas:

how well they felt they had achieved in terms of improving their language skills, this focused, above all, on listening skills, translating skills, and vocabulary acquisition

how well they felt they had furthered their knowledge of German current affairs

how well they felt they had achieved in terms of improving their independent learning skills such as discipline and time management, in recognising and assessing their own weaknesses and in being able to address those weaknesses

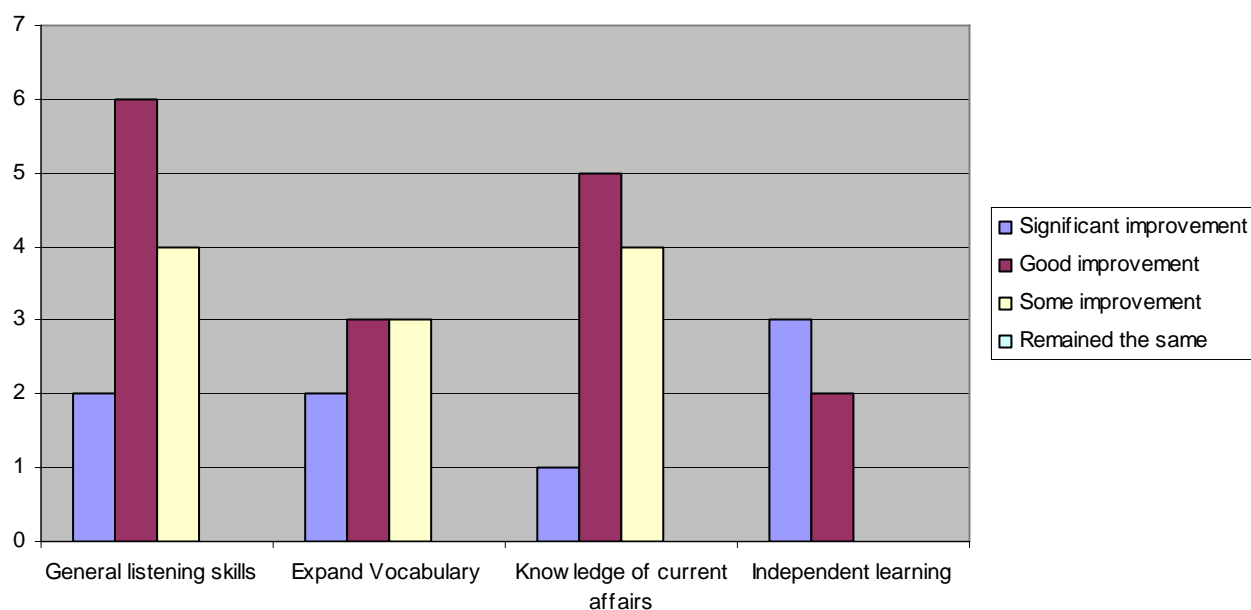
how interesting, challenging and motivating they found the materials

In each instance students were given a range of possible answers from which to select, such as ‘significant improvement’, good improvement’ ‘some improvement’ or ‘remained the same’.

As cohorts in German are currently relatively small at the College, it should be noted that any statistics only represent 10-12 students in each cohort in the first year of this survey. Nevertheless, initial results offer some general encouragement in terms of the generally positive response to both programmes, although there is also room for improvement in terms of developing a more disciplined approach amongst students to achieve a more regular input rather than allowing work to build up at the end of the semester.

Figure 1 indicates some of the important detail of student responses on the Level 2 programme where the majority of students indicated that there are a number of learning outcomes which may be achieved using the materials. Interestingly, all students

FIGURE 1: To what extent did you achieve your learning objectives ? (LEVEL 2)

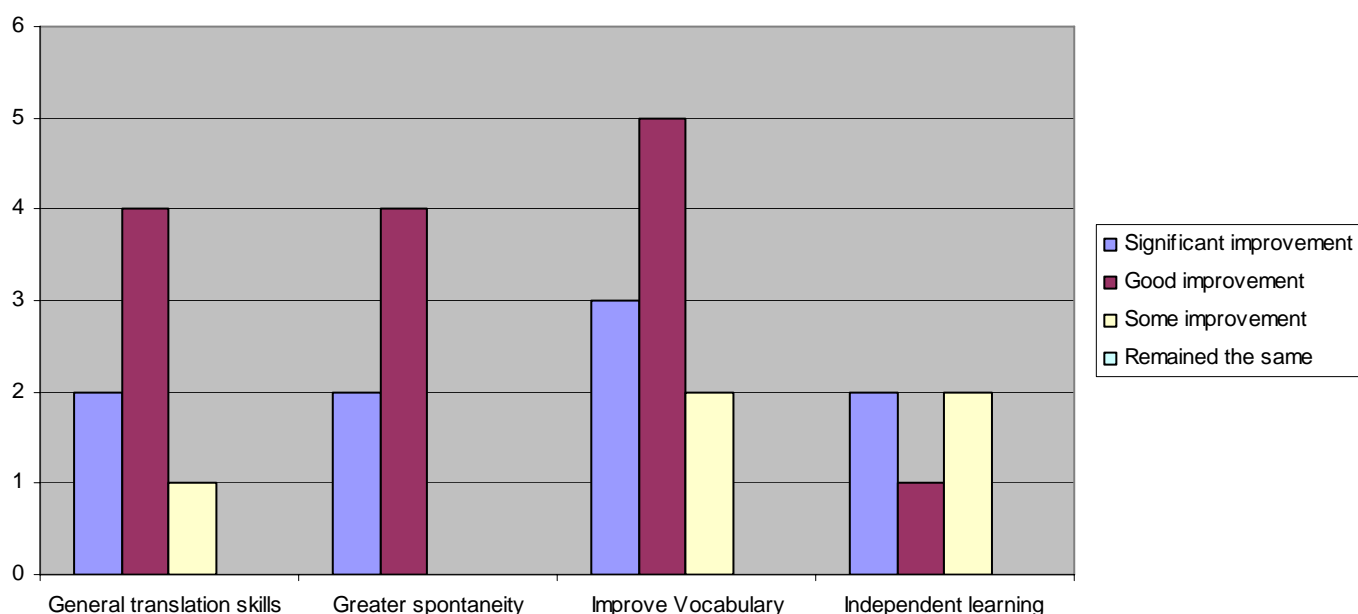


recorded some benefit to listening skills with a majority recording a ‘good improvement’. There was a similar pattern regarding developing awareness of German current affairs although here the number recording ‘significant’ and ‘good improvement’ was slightly lower. Two thirds of students also recorded some benefit to vocabulary development. Although, the link to improving independent learning skills seems to be less obvious, with over half focussing on improvements elsewhere, there are here the beginnings of acknowledgement that such skills belong to the learning profile. It is also of interest that of those who experienced improvement in this area, the majority perceived it to be a ‘significant improvement’. The materials themselves were also generally very well received by the students and seen as

appropriate and interesting and challenging by virtually the whole cohort. To be noted as well, however, are a couple of comments that some students had found the programme very time-consuming and hadn't always been able to finish each week (This was despite the fact that reports were mostly 1-2 minutes long but, of course, inevitably quite dense). There was also some very gratifying unsolicited feedback from the standard end of module evaluations whereby approximately half the cohort saw these materials as the most beneficial of the module

For the Level 3 students on the translation module the use of the video clips was also deemed by the majority as having helped them achieve a range of learning outcomes and although different outcomes were highlighted the general profile is, in fact, very similar to that of the Year 2 cohort. (Figure 2)

FIGURE 2: To what extent did you achieve your learning objectives ? (LEVEL 3)



The emphasis is again placed on the linguistic skills targeted, whereby the benefit to vocabulary and general passive understanding was seen as the most

improved area of learning and again the whole cohort recorded some improvement, with most selecting 'good improvement'. Students also perceived positive developments in their translating skills, with around two-thirds of students seeing the programme as having had some beneficial influence on their translating skills, most of them recording a 'good improvement' and half the students perceiving either 'significant' or 'good improvement' in their ability to translate spontaneously. The impact on independent learning skills was recognised by almost half of this cohort and although this is still to a lesser degree than linguistic skill areas, it is gratifying that the students recognised the value of the more generic skills. There was also a similar level of appreciation of the materials as 'interesting and challenging' or 'very interesting' and again the time-consuming nature of the task was recorded in a comment that more time was required to exploit materials adequately.

Across the two programmes the initial results are then relatively encouraging to pursue the two programmes into a second year. Despite initial misgivings amongst the students, the majority generally recognised a range of benefits and not surprisingly, above all, those who followed the weekly routine most rigorously. All students considered the materials themselves to be both interesting and challenging and clearly enjoyed video viewing in this way. The less positive results came, as to be expected, from those students who acknowledged in the questionnaire that they had not followed the weekly regime very diligently. Future developments will include a more intensive induction into the programme allowing students to record their own aims

onto the College's electronic progress file and possibly some input into Year 1 to lay the foundations of independent learning techniques on the laboratory network earlier on. It would also be interesting to introduce a diagnostic software such as 'Dialang' to assess students' language skills more objectively both before and after the programme, although it would not be possible to cover translation skills in this way.

Conclusion

Current expertise on the exploitation of digital language laboratories in schools and higher education points to the fact that they are frequently underused. First hand experience suggests that this relates in part to the immense effort required by staff to develop new digital materials and learning methods in order to fully exploit the applications available. It is also often difficult to encourage students to access the language laboratory independently. It tends to be difficult to motivate them to maintain regular input and they can be demanding regarding the type of materials that interest them. The two projects undertaken have shown that short on-line video clips can provide a uniquely rich resource for the digital language laboratory which when incorporated into a structured self-access programme offer a sound model for intensive language work. The outcome of the research carried out at University of Chester would indicate that the benefits of encouraging regular independent listening practice via short video clips can be quite considerable and that these benefits are also widely perceived amongst the students themselves.

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